

NEURO LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING

The Study of the Structure of Subjective Experience

by Dean Winter

Neuro Linguistic Programming (N.L.P.) is a refreshing new concept in the study of personal dynamics. Its main difference from the bulk of new age therapies is the fact that it deals specifically with the *structure* of human processes and experience, rather than the content of the experience.



It was developed in the late '70s by two Americans, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, who together decided to investigate the how of some therapists' remarkable successes, while other therapists could do basically the same things but not get the results. For this they chose Milton Erickson, Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir primarily, as they were getting incredible results.

Their first radical departure from orthodox psychology was with this original attitude - who ever heard of studying people who are good at something? Like allopathic medicine today, modern psychology deals almost solely with problems.

Richard and John decided this was a bit like trying to build a better car by researching the wrecks that didn't make it in a scrap yard. They felt that if they could learn how someone did something well, they could teach it to others who couldn't.

One of the things they found is something they've called Representational Systems. This is, that people encode their experiences into their memory in one of three ways - *visually*, *auditorially* or *kinesthetically* (feelings) - there is a fourth, *olfactory/gustatory* (smell and taste) but that isn't used much except in some 'primitive' cultures.

For instance, how often have you been in an argument with one person saying something like:

"But don't you see", or "I just want you to get a better picture of this" and the other person keeps replying with:

"I just can't seem to grasp it", or "It doesn't feel right.



Frustrating isn't it? And it doesn't seem to get any better, no matter how often or loudly you repeat your part of it. All that usually happens is that a rather tense truce is eventually called (unless one feigns understanding) with both of you thinking of the other as being stupid and resistant or a pushy megalomaniac; neither having a real understanding of what the problem is.

The problem brought up is not so much one of who is right and who is wrong (I don't think there is any such objective categorization anyway) as it is an example of two people using two different methods of coding and storing their experiences and the clash that results when they are unskillfully combined. A bit like trying to play a VHS video cassette in a Beta machine; you might eventually force it in, but you won't get any intelligible results.

As an example, close your eyes and think of a recent experience, one that is easy to remember. Some of you will recall it as a picture of the event, others of you will recall how you felt about it and there is a third group, those people who have the sometimes annoying, sometimes lifesaving ability to remember exactly what was said and who said what and in what order in a conversation even years ago (or maybe a sort of running commentary of the event), who remember it auditorially.

One of the easiest ways to tell which Representational System a person is using is to listen to the words they use to describe their experience specifically the predicates (verbs, adverbs and adjectives). There are other ways to tell but I'll only deal with these for now.



A primarily *visual* person (or at least a person operating in the visual mode) will use words and phrases like:

I see, obscure, perspective, focus, look, illuminate, glimpse, show, clear, watch, illustrate etc.

A primarily *auditorial* person will say things like:

Hear, listen, talk, noisy, amplify, whine, groan, tune in, rings a bell, etc.

A primarily *kinesthetic* (feeling) person will say:

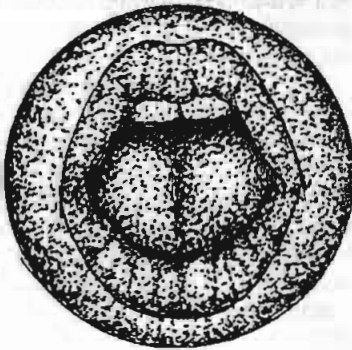
Feel, touch, warm, tight, tense, hurt, relaxed, tremble, penetrate, stiff, creeps, etc.

Any given experience for a person may of course have more than one Rep system component, though usually one of the systems will predominate. For a different experience a different Rep system may be used, although we tend to stick with our favourites. It is not uncommon either to find one Representational System completely absent from a person's consciousness. Whenever this person does experience this Rep system, they usually endow it with mystical or magical properties as they are not used to it.

Imagine a blind man seeing or a deaf person hearing and witness the trauma and confusion of a lot of men in this culture coming to grips with their feelings for the first time.

So we have these three Representational Systems which are all quite valid and accurate. The problems arise however, when one system is confused with another.

To put it more simply, when one person is talking about their *feelings* it isn't generally effective to try to get them to take a different *point of view*. If you do find yourself getting nowhere like this, stop and try to find what system the person is



mainly using. If you can, join them in that system (use the same words) and you can often resolve what at first seemed an impasse very quickly.

Richard and John took Rep Systems even further into the structure of experience and started to look at different aspects of experience. To take the *visual* system for example; the size of the picture, whether it was colour or black and white, movie or still, brightness, location, hue, clarity

and as many other descriptions of the image as you or they could think of (stay away from the content of the image). They called these elements Submodalities and found some very interesting effects associated with them. They found that if one or more of these submodalities are changed then the impact of the image is changed as well.

Try this now:

Close your eyes and think of a very pleasant experience, pause for a moment to reconnect with it and be sure you see what you saw at the time that pleasant experience happened. Be there. As you look at it, change the brightness and notice how your feelings change in response.



First make it brighter - then dimmer until it's nearly gone - then brighter again. There are always exceptions, but for most of you making the picture brighter will increase the intensity of your feelings and making it dimmer will decrease the intensity of feelings.

Now think of an unpleasant memory, something that makes you feel bad. Make the picture dimmer, leave it like that. If you turn it down enough it won't bother you at all. Seems simple doesn't it.

This was with the brightness submodality and the same can be done with the others. Try it if you wish with size, it works just as well. There are exceptions of course (aren't there always). If you increase the brightness so that it washes out the details of the content, that will reduce the intensity of feelings, not increase them.

Same thing with a candle lit dinner - it hardly increases your pleasant feelings to put it under a bank of arc lights; a fear of the dark doesn't get any stronger when you turn the lights on. These are exceptions though and when you think about them they obviously make sense. The important thing is to find which ones work for you. Some submodalities will have little or no effect for different people; find the ones that are powerful for you and you can save a fortune in psychotherapy bills.



Submodalities also apply to the other Representational Systems and so here is an incomplete list:

Visual - Colour, brightness, saturation, shape, size, location.

Auditory - Pitch, volume, timbre, patterning, speed.

Kinesthetic - Location, form, texture, pressure, temperature.

These can all be used in much the same way as I described in the visual example earlier.

So, we have three Representational Systems, V.A.K., the three ways we store our experience in our memory. These three systems can each be broken down into descriptive qualities or sub-modalities. These are the smallest units of information that we use, the building blocks of experience. If you change significant submodalities you will change all other chunk sizes that rest upon them and hence the experience itself.

There is a lot more to N.L.P., but Representational Systems and Submodalities form a good basis for it. If you wish to know more there are some good books around by Richard Bandler and John Grinder; start with "Frogs into Princes".